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ABSTRACT

The problems of acquisition, bibliographic control, and accessibility to official documents, which are more pronounced in developing than developed countries, are reflected by the experience of the University of Zambia library. The library is concerned not only with Zambian official documents, but also with those of other Anglophone Sub-Saharan African countries, and publications of the United Nations and its agencies. The library's problems include inadequate bibliographical tools, shortages of foreign exchange and qualified personnel, unbalanced exchange programs, lack of standardized headings for government bodies, lack of legal depository privileges for Zambian documents, and restrictive library security practices that limit access for citizens and researchers. (Author/RAA)

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PROBLEMS WITH THE ACQUISITION AND BIBLIOGRAPHIC CONTROL OF OFFICIAL DOCUMENTS AND THEIR ACCESSIBILITY TO CITIZENS AND RESEARCHERS - THE UNIVERSITY OF ZAMBIA LIBRARY EXPERIENCE

by

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Problems with the acquisition and bibliographic control of official documents and their accessibility to citizens and researchers - the University of Zambia Library Experience

by

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Abstract

The problems of acquisition, bibliographic control and accessibility to official documents, are more pronounced in developing countries than in developed countries and this is reflected in the University of Zambia Library's experience. The University of Zambia Library is concerned not only with Zambian official documents, but also with those of other Anglophone Sub-Saharan African countries and publications of the United Nations and its agencies. The Library's problems include inadequate bibliographical tools, shortages of foreign exchange and qualified personnel, unbalanced exchange programmes, lack of standardized headings for Government bodies, and lack of legal depository privilege for Zambian documents.

Introduction:

Governments must certainly rank as the most prolific publishers in the world. The mountain of reports, gazettes, monographs and serials issued each day poses a persistent challenge to official documents staff everywhere, but is perhaps most acute for librarians in third world countries. The lack of adequate bibliographical tools, shortages of foreign exchange and qualified manpower, and difficulties of maintaining balanced exchange programmes, which are the norm in most developing countries, add up to a gigantic headache for the struggling official documents librarian

over and above the inherent problems of government documents afflicting colleagues in the "developed" world. The difficulties experienced by the Official Documents Section of the University of Zambia Library in many ways exemplify these trends. So, perhaps by examining them in greater detail in a forum like this one, we may be able to work towards solutions of general application to similar collections in other developing countries.

Definition:

The Workshop on African Government Documents held in Tangier, Algeria, four years ago defined government documents as "all records generated by and for the government and its agencies. These are documents generated, financed, published or reproduced and distributed by, or for the government and its agencies"(1). Although this definition is restricted to Government documents only, it can be expanded to accommodate the broader term 'Official documents'. Thus we may define Official documents by substituting words in the above definition so as to read "all records generated by and for governments and international bodies and their agencies. These are documents generated, financed, published or reproduced and distributed by, or for governments and international bodies and their agencies".

The Collection:

The University of Zambia (UNZA) Library was opened only a decade ago and currently houses a collection of approximately 250,000 volumes and subscribes to approximately 1,500 serial titles. Built largely through contributions of Zambia's workers and peasants, it carries the dual responsibility of serving UNZA staff and students (approximately 4,500) and the community in general in its role as the National Reference Library. The official documents collection forms an integral part of the Special Collections of the Library and is at present administered by one Assistant Librarian, one Library Assistant, and a Library Attendant.

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(1) Final Report of the Preparatory Workshop on African Government Documents, Tangier, 7-11 June, 1976. Organized by African Training and Research Centre in Administration for Development (CAFRAD) in collaboration with the International Development Research Centre, Ottawa, Canada, 1976.

UNZA Library is designated the full United Nations deposit Library for Zambia, so with the exception of World Bank and International Labour Organization materials, which have to be acquired by purchase, the Library receives comprehensive collection of United Nations documents. Until April 1979, UNZA Library also had depository status for Canadian Official publications. This privilege was withdrawn because of the change of government at that time in Canada.

The Library strives after the ideal of a complete collection of Zambian Government documents including materials issued by the ruling party, the United National Independence Party. A selective collection from neighbouring states in Central, Eastern and Southern Africa is maintained including documents from Malawi, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Botswana, Lesotho, Swaziland, Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, historical documents from the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland (dissolved in 1963) and British Government documents relating to Central Africa. Most of these documents are in hard copy format, however, UNZA Library has a growing collection of documents on microfilm, including the Readex series of UN documents, British Sessional Papers, Colonial Office documents, and archive copies of outstanding Zambian Government documents produced by the Library's own photographic unit.

In short, UNZA Library has to cope with its functions as depository Library for United Nations and, until recently, Canadian Official Documents, as well as provide for an extensive research interest in the Government documents of Anglophone Sub-Saharan African countries.

Acquisition Problems:

Like many other libraries in developing countries where funds lag far behind the grand visions of librarians and the expectations of readers, UNZA Library has attempted to build its official documents collection through exchange, deposit, and donation in addition to direct purchase and credit arrangements with various Government Printers. Currently exchange agreements exist with the universities of Zimbabwe, Dar-es-Salaam (Tanzania) and an agreement has just been concluded with the University of Malawi (April 1980). Our exchange agreements have worked reasonably well.

However, they cover only a very restricted range of publications eg. for Tanzania only gazettes, debates and a few annual reports are exchanged at irregular intervals. Donations are solicited from Ministries of the Zambian Government and an agreement exists with the Zambian Government Printer for the regular donation of annual reports, gazettes, and parliamentary debates. The majority of material acquired from other African countries is obtained by direct purchase or in the case of Kenya and Uganda, a deposit is made with the Government Printers Departments and the costs of our orders are debited to our account.

For documents produced within Zambia, our chief problem is that the Library does not enjoy the privilege of legal deposit. This necessitates an endless round of begging letters to ministries and departments when we discover they have published reports.

Finding out what the various departments and ministries have produced is a major problem in its. if as there is no reliable comprehensive guide to government documents produced within the country, especially for publications emanating from provincial offices. Our usual, if rather unconventional bibliographical technique, is to make regular visits to government departments in Lusaka and to send a continuous barrage of enquiries to the provincial offices of the various ministries. This, together with information gleaned from the Government Printers annual catalogue and from members of the University staff along the academic "grapevine" enables us to keep roughly up-to-date with the local output of Government publications.

The problem of inadequate and incomplete bibliographical tools for the official documents of other African countries is a major stumbling block to building a balanced collection for the States within our area of interest. Some countries, eg. Swaziland, have no up-to-date catalogue of Government publications and in most African states official documents are not issued from a centralised distribution point. As a result of this it is very difficult to have an overview of any country's output eg. in Malawi the Government Printer issues an excellent annual catalogue but in addition one must be sure to receive the catalogue of the National Statistical Office in order to have an accurate picture of Malawian Government documents at any one time. The catalogues of the Geological Survey Department, the Department of Antiquities, and other ministries

or departments are equally useful in bridging the gaps. This problem is confounded by the difficulties in keeping up to date with new official publications as they are released because many African countries, including Zambia, have no regular bulletins announcing new government documents outside of the annual catalogue. Some States do cater for this need by issuing regular announcements eg. Kenya and Malawi list new publications in their gazettes and the South African Government Printer issues monthly lists of new official documents.

Knowing what has been published is less than half the battle for most libraries in developing countries, the big bugbear is of course, finance. Zambia, like many of her sister nations of the Third World, faces a chronic and acute shortage of foreign exchange. This situation has necessitated the Bank of Zambia to introduce a restrictive licencing system for foreign purchases. The result is that since this system was introduced in 1975, very few foreign orders have actually been received in Zambia as payment of proforma invoices is prolonged indefinitely in the Central Bank. Thus the library's once magnificent collection of Anglophone Sub-Saharan official documents is gradually becoming dated. Similar problems have affected our deposit arrangements with the Kenya Government Printer and political turmoil in Uganda up until the fall of the Amin Regime has virtually stifled our supply of Ugandan Government documents since 1971.

Problems of Bibliographical Control:

The bibliographical control of official documents is of course, one of the most persistent problems facing librarians. Let us look briefly at UNZA's approach to cataloguing Government publications and move on to some more general problems of bibliographical control of official documents in Africa.

At UNZA Library, the two classification schemes currently utilized are the Makerere University Library's Classification Scheme for Government documents and the United Nations' Document Symbols. The Makerere Scheme, developed at Makerere University Library (Uganda) in the mid 1960's, classifies material both by government department and format. The documents of different countries are prefixed in the notation with the letters "Gov" and then the first three letters of the country eg, "Zam" for Zambia. If the document is issued by a particular ministry or department it is next assigned a Cutter number for the department eg.

the Ministry of Agriculture is represented as "A4", and then a symbol representing format according to the following symbols:-

(02) monograph
(05) serial
(059) annual
(08) series

Finally, documents are given Cutter numbers by title, accession numbers in the case of annual reports, or abbreviated titles for series. The annual report of the Zambian Ministry of Agriculture would for example, appear as "Gov. Zam A4 (058)1". Monographs issued both by African Governments, and United Nations' agencies are annotated with the Government or Agency symbol, format notation "(02)", the year of publication, and then accession number. Thus Zambia's Third National Development Plan, 1979-1983 would be classified "Gov. Zam (02)1979/18". The classification is simple and seems to work reasonably well. However, many users complain that this system does not bring like subjects together eg. development plans issued in different years are widely separated. As for UN Document Symbols by which most of our depository collection is classified, they have proved abstruse and confusing to both the public and clerical staff who shelve and retrieve these materials from closed stacks. The excellent indexes published by the UN, "UNDOC" and "UNDEX" are used only very rarely by readers who seem to be rather intimidated by the mass of information and curious complex symbols! These confusions are compounded by the fact that none of the present official documents staff has had any formal training in UN Document Symbols.

A major problem in cataloguing African Government documents is the lack of standardized headings for Ministries and Government Departments. African countries seem to take great delight in driving librarians to despair with their persistent habit of ministerial or departmental name changing. This situation is aggravated by the usual reorganization of Government ministries in the immediate post independence period. So, users are forced to look in many different places in the catalogues for an historical perspective on particular departments. UNESCO's recent efforts to standardise ministerial names for African countries will be an enormous help in overcoming the cataloguing problems we now face.

As noted above in the section on acquisition problems, lack of authoritative bibliographical tools for African official documents is an enormous obstacle to better bibliographical control. Many African nations do not issue comprehensive national bibliographies giving detailed listings of official documents. Government Printers' catalogues are often incomplete guides to total output and offer no historical perspective or standardised headings on which librarians can base reliable bibliographical control mechanisms. This situation has recently been improved by the excellent series of bibliographies of African official documents published by the Library of Congress, African Section, eg. East African Community, subject guide to official publications (1976). These bibliographies are based on the extensive holdings of the Library of Congress and other American libraries reporting to the National Union Catalog, "New Serial Titles" and the "Joint Acquisitions List of Africana". But surely it is time that such fundamental bibliographical projects be carried out by Africans within the continent.

Accessibility:

As in many developing countries where there is no National Library as such, UNZA Library being the largest library in the nation, carries the dual responsibility of serving both the academic and general communities as the officially designated National Reference Library. In theory then, the Library must make available its extensive collection of official documents to a potentially huge number of readers with enormously varied educational backgrounds. In practice, however, the use of the collection is limited severely by library policies which seek to protect the integrity of our files and by other constraining factors of more general significance.

Official documents are kept either in closed stacks (UN, Canadian, and East African documents except for monographs) or in the Special Collections' Reading Room. The latter is a security area of the Library requiring special entry passes for students and members of the public (documents from the following countries are stored in this area: Zambia, Malawi, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Botswana, Lesotho, Swaziland, and British colonial documents relating to Central Africa). Location of many documents is limited to the public catalogues and registration books and we find that many readers therefore do not know of the existence of the majority of the collection. Closed access for UN, East African and Canadian documents

means there is no facility for "browsing" and therefore the great potential of the UN collection in particular is underutilized. At present, again to protect our collection, no borrowing of official documents is allowed within the University except to academic staff for very restricted periods on "special loan" and there are no facilities for postal loans to members of the public.

Problems of accessibility with wider significance limiting the use of official documents include the fact that all Zambian Government documents are published in the official language, English, which is a foreign tongue to the majority of the population. Combine this with a high rate of illiteracy amongst Zambia's rural population and one can imagine the limited access to Government information suffered by the majority of the population which is typical of many other developing countries.

A look to the future:

Many fundamental issues beyond the control of our Library are currently constraining our ability to offer a comprehensive official documents service. These include inadequate provision of foreign exchange, lack of qualified staff and the paucity of comprehensive bibliographical tools for African official documents. One hopes that in the future these outstanding problems can be modified by internal discussion and external cooperation through such organizations as UNESCO, FID and IFLA to improve the bibliographical control mechanisms for African Government documents. Our dream is that one day, UNZA Library will be declared a legal deposit not only for Zambian official documents but for all publications on Zambia. This will greatly improve our official documents service, though as experience has shown in other developing nations, legal deposit is difficult to push through the Legislature and is not necessarily the complete answer to the problem of bibliographical control of the Nations' official documents output.